

Assessment FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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What is assessment?

Assessment has generally come to be defined as an ongoing and systematic process of “collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Within this definition, there are several important components to consider. First, assessment is ongoing. Assessment must be viewed as a continual process, without a conceptual end. In order for it to be effective, assessors (institutions and its members) must use assessment as a cumulative approach (American Association for Higher Education, 1992). While episodic assessment may be better than none, its impact is maximized when used holistically. Second, educational values of your specific institution must be a primary indicator of where assessors are to start, as they should drive what we assess and how we assess it (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996). Third, the collection of information (data) and the methods used to do so are important factors. While the collection techniques can vary from institution to institution and discipline to discipline, they must be systematic and purposefully driven (Suskie, 2009). Rubrics, institutional examinations, and portfolios can all serve as an example of collection methods. Fourth, the information received through these collection methods must be reviewed. This involves the inclusion of multiple members of the institution, as well as using techniques that are best practice. Fifth, the information that has been collected and reviewed must be used to improve student learning. Information that is simply collected and sits on a shelf is worthless to the assessment process. Action must be taken to ensure opportunities are given to students to achieve learning outcomes (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Sixth, a piece of the assessment process often overlooked is communication of results to appropriate audiences. Even if communication is valued, assessors are frequently only concerned with communication to accreditors. However, assessment measures and results should be communicated to students, donors, faculty, and administrators (Walvoord, 2010). Lastly, and building off of the previous notions, assessment is multidimensional and integrative. There is no one best way to do

assessment; assessors must incorporate several methods when measuring student learning outcomes.

In conclusion, assessment should:

- Be ongoing and systematic.
- Be purposive and meaningful.
- Be driven by institutional values.
- Involve best practice methods.
- Be communicated to stakeholders.
- Be understood as multifaceted.

References

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What is the difference between course and program assessment?

Determining the difference between course assessment and program assessment has become a concern for many professionals in higher education. The primary differences between the two are the components to be reviewed, the level of aggregation, and the parties involved (Miller & Leskes, 2005). **Course assessment** usually takes place within the confines of a single classroom or course (Walvoord, 2010). Typically, course assessment involves reviewing tests and assignments that makeup a course grade (Suskie, 2009). However, this does not just mean assigning individual grades, but reflecting on how well students are achieving course goals as a whole (Suskie, 2009). Course assessment can be limited to an individual faculty member reviewing student work, but may also involve other faculty members collaboratively creating rubrics and course

goals. Results of course assessment are improved student learning, course curriculum, and faculty pedagogy.

Program assessment is both the collective results of multiple course assessments, coupled with broader reaching goals and measures. (Think the whole is more than the sum of its parts.) Academic programs may have goals and assessments that are more comprehensive than courses. It incorporates components such as embedded course assignments, capstone experiences, field experiments, portfolios, and published tests, as well as indirect measures like alumni surveys and senior exit interviews (Suskie, 2009). Within this context, faculty members and assessment professionals are attempting to conclude whether an overall program is effective in helping students achieve student learning outcomes across multiple dimensions. Results of program assessment are confirmation or rejection of program purpose, alignment of program design with desired outcomes, and identify superfluous or missing curricular and co-curricular elements (Miller & Leskes, 2005).

While the two levels of assessments may have their differentiations, the greatest maximization of their efforts is when the two are designed, constructed, and implemented in conjunction (Richman & Ariocich, 2013).

References

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- Richman, W. A., & Ariocich, L. (2013). All-in-One: Combining Grading, Course, Program, and General education Outcomes Assessment. *National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment*, 1-28.
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Are course grades proper assessment measures?

Within the context of assessment, many question whether course grades are an effective form of assessment. The answer to this question is generally not. Primarily, course grades alone do not provide the components necessary for a comprehensive assessment. Course grades fail to provide meaningful information on what, exactly; students have learned (Walvoord, 2010). For example, a

student's grade of a "B" in an English class does not offer specifics about what area within the class and what learning outcomes the student excelled in or was deficient in. Another complication of course grades is they may take into consideration attendance or participation, which generally do not directly relate to a student learning outcome (Suskie, 2009). Further, course grades can be inconsistent across different faculty members, who emphasize different learning outcomes (Suskie, 2009). Sometimes individual grading criteria are vague, leading to an occasion where an essay may earn an "A" on one equation and a "B" the next. This highlights the notion that assessment is a collaborative undertaking and should be done at the course and program level, eliminating these potential variances. Course grades can be indicators of learning outcomes if they are based solely on direct evidence of student learning such as tests, projects, papers, and assignments that are clearly linked to major learning outcomes (Palomba & Banta, 1999) (Suskie, 2009). In conclusion, course grades do not provide detailed information on the strengths and weaknesses of student learning, which limits the ability to create evidence based improvements.

Course Grades:

- Should not take the place of assessment
- Do not provide detailed evidence of learning outcomes
- May incorporate behaviors not directly related to student learning
- May be vague and inconsistent
- Can be useful, when based on direct measures
- Provide limited evidence for program improvement

References

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How does assessment affect academic freedom?

Assessment, the principles that guide it, and the organizations that drive it have been viewed by some as an infringement on academic freedom. These skeptics claim that assessment is a dangerous encroachment on institution's and faculty's ability to teach and conduct research within their respective fields (Cain, 2014). However, this does not have to be the case.

Academic freedom has been defined by the AAUP as the right to engage in research, scholarship, inquiry, and expression without fear of repercussion (Suskie, 2015). Within this definition are key aspects that must be respected for the betterment of student learning and development, but the principles of assessment do not inherently contradict these core tenants of academic freedom. Assessment is primarily a means to ensure students are achieving learning outcomes. Gary Rhoads, general secretary of the AAUP, stated that AAUP sees assessment of student learning and reform of teaching and academic programs as the primary responsibility of faculty (Suskie, 2015). Faculty cannot view academic freedom as an excuse from their responsibility to ensure that students have sufficient opportunity to achieve those goals that the faculty collectively agree are essential (Suskie, 2009). In order to facilitate the best assessment of student learning and one that does not obstruct academic freedom, faculty must be involved in all levels of the assessment process (Walvoord, 2010).

References

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